# *Afterreligion* after Religion

Gustavo Benavides

"THE GREATEST scholars require the closest study"—thus begins Steven Wasserstrom's *Religion after Religion.* "The greatest scholars require the closest study"—with almost liturgical ineluctability, the phrase reappears throughout the book, the phrase being as true as one could possibly wish, for *Religion after Religion* is a close study of the work of three scholars who, for good or ill, have become identified with Islamic mysticism, Jewish mysticism, and comparative religion. But even more than the relentless erudition with which Wasserstrom builds up his case, it is the sense of moral outrage, so rare these days, that is the most remarkable, indeed the most admirable, quality of the book. The author of *Religion after Religion* is a moralist, this adjective being used here without either the written or the implied quotation marks—without the tiresome sarcasm—that generally protects us from such terms. Wasserstrom's outrage, kept under control while he traces in painstaking detail the mystical hubris that overcame the theorists associated with Eranos, bursts out from time to time, when he reminds his readers of the real history that was taking place, in some cases helped along by theories that were claimed to be outside time and therefore above history.

Wasserstrom shows the dangers present when reality is understood in pan-symbolic terms and when access to this symbolically transfigured reality is mediated by authoritarian interpreters. As his book shows that the historians of religion with whom he is concerned regarded themselves as the gatekeepers of the *via regia* (royal way) (99), it seems to follow that for them, as Wasserstrom puts it, "*The Historian of Religions is in a better position than anyone to reveal the deepest aspects of reality*" (97). He goes on to point out the dangers of decontextualizing symbols into phenomenology, thus divesting the symbols of their embeddedness in some historical solidarity (98). He regards the hermeneut as a magician, and just

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*Journal of the American Academy of Religion* June 2001, Vol. 69, No. 2, pp. 449–457
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as Eliade refers to Varuna, the god who binds his creatures, Wasserstrom sees Eliade as the magician, or at least as the performer, who uses his command of dehistoricized symbols to bind, to hypnotize his audience (106).[1] Wasserstrom warns about being seduced by the notion of *coincidentia oppositorum* and writes that "inasmuch as *coincidentia oppositorum* reigned supreme in the study of religion as conceived by Scholem, Corbin, and Eliade, . . . this seemingly irrefutable relativization of evil should raise a warning flag for the current study of religion" (78). Similarly, he devotes an important section of the book to an examination of the fascination that the coincidence of opposites in action—that is, antinomianism—exerted on the theorists associated with Eranos.

Given Wasserstrom's combination of erudition, righteous indignation, and fairness, one is surprised by those rare instances in which the zeal to establish connections among historians of religion and fascist sympathizers leads him to make juxtapositions—in effect, indictments by association—that can be misunderstood by an uninformed reader. An example of this guilt by association occurs when Corbin, described "as a lifelong Teutonophile, and as a sworn enemy of liberal democracy and secular humanism," is said to have associated in Istanbul with Germans and Rumanians (146–147), the implication being that the Germans with whom Corbin consorted must have been Nazis—Nazis, like Heidegger, the author of *Was ist Metaphysik?* a book that Corbin had translated into French in 1938. The fact is that not all the Germans who spent the war years in Istanbul were Nazis. There is no evidence, for example, that Islamicist Hellmut Ritter (314n.13) was a Nazi sympathizer. In fact, Ritter—whose brother, historian Gerhard Ritter, had been in prison from 1944 to 1945 for having belonged to a resistance group—detested the Nazis, having left the Reich for Istanbul as a result of the persecution of homosexuals under National Socialism.[2] Ritter returned to Germany and taught at the university of Frankfurt after 1949, after having done research on manuscripts of mystical texts in Turkish archives and having taught at the University of Istanbul from 1935 to 1948. To Ritter's name we could add that of indologist Walter Ruben, who after spending the war years in Turkey settled in East Germany, where he wrote about India from a Marxist perspective. Wasserstrom himself mentions Erich Auerbach (6–7, passim), although one wonders why the author of *Mimesis*—a book written in

[1] On Varuna as the god who binds, see Dumézil: 64–65

[2] I owe this information to Professor Jacques Waardenburg (personal communication, Lausanne, 27 March 2000)

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Istanbul—is consistently referred to as Elias, rather than Erich, the name he used in all his publications.[3]

It is not clear either why Wasserstrom identifies the "history of religions" with Eliade, Corbin, and Scholem and places its birth so resolutely in 1949, at the beginning of the Cold War, when Corbin and Scholem first spoke at Eranos (127). Is he right in identifying the history of religions with its Ascona and, later, with its North American incarnations? Is it not the case, rather, that the Eranos group constitutes but one of the episodes of the history of religions approach, one that can be traced back to the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* and to Max Müller? What is to be done with the Dutch, Scandinavian, and Italian traditions of scholarship on religion? Where, for example, should one place scholars such as Raffaele Pettazzoni or Geo Widengren, to mention two of the presidents of the International Association for the History of Religions—two scholars of different political persuasions who shared an interests in high gods? The Italian Pettazzoni was a liberal, even though his chair at the University of Rome was created in 1924, that is, during the fascist regime, such creation being resisted by the Roman Church; on the other hand, Widengren, a Swede, was a conservative who fought as a volunteer officer against the Soviet army in Finland.

But these are mere details. What is crucial is that Wasserstrom has singled out for study the affinities between the approach to religion common during some of the darkest years of the twentieth century and the Decisionism of Jünger, Schmitt, and Heidegger.[4] This link is crucial, for this Decisionism is present also at the heart of Rudolf Otto's understanding of the Holy—*das Heilige* being that which, free from all links with morality and reason, strikes blindly, setting itself apart from the ordinary world as a permanent "state of exception" (*Ausnahmezustand*). Similarly, the emphasis on religion as experience found among the historians of religion who worked in Weimar Germany—Hauer, Wach, W. F. Otto, and Heiler, among others—resonates with the role played by experience in writers such as Jünger (Benavides 1992). It is here that the context of Eliade's hierophanies is to be sought, and Wasserstrom is to be thanked

[3] I have not been able to ascertain whether "Elias" was Erich Auerbach's Jewish name. Elias Auerbach (born in 1882) was a physician and historian who wrote on ancient Near Eastern religions and who settled in Haifa in 1929. I am thankful to Dr Christoph Auffarth, of Tubingen, for information on Elias Auerbach

[4] On Decisionism, see Krockow. Given the continuous popularity of Heidegger's ponderous ruminations, as well as the renewed interest in Junger and Schmitt, it is incomprehensible that Krockow's lucid study, which is once again available in German (as of 1990), remains untranslated.

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for being one of the few scholars who have investigated the affinities between the theories of religion and the political theories that prevailed during the 1920s and 1930s. It is less the Eranos meetings than the Decisionist connection that will allow us to understand the peculiarities of the approach to religion that prevailed during the years of the Weimar Republic and of triumphant fascism—and even earlier, as Otto's *Das Heilige* was published in 1917. Equally helpful is Wasserstrom's discussion of the way in which notions such as "profound emotion" (*Ergriffenheit*) and "suddenness" (*Plotzlichkeit*) functioned as links among writers such as Jünger, Benjamin, Bloch, and Scholem—authors whom, from our safe vantage point, we tend to classify as either reactionary or revolutionary.

Given this sober discussion of some of Scholem's flirtations with *Ergriffenheit* and his love affair with antinomianism (not to mention the amusing belief Scholem once held that his very name destined him to be a messiah), one is surprised by the manner in which Wasserstrom's history of the history of religions proceeds, like the alchemical processes so dear to Jung, from the *nigredo* and *mortificatio* of mystocentrism to the stage of *albedo*,[5] embodied by Scholem's historically aware study of religion. Indeed, Wasserstrom's *Heilsgeschichte* seems to be the history of ideas counterpart of what Novick has called "'Holocaust to Redemption' pageantry" (160): those pilgrimages arranged by Zionist groups on which, after visiting German concentration camps in Poland, young North American Jews end their journey triumphantly in Israel, where they celebrate Independence Day. But are we supposed to believe that in order not to be contaminated by fascist or mystagogic fantasies, the study of religion has to have as its model the historically informed kind that Scholem practices, especially when the history Scholem writes consistently rejects social interpretations of religious phenomena?[6] To put it bluntly, is Scholem redeemed from the darkness of *Afterreligion* by having written history of religions as a Zionist? Wasserstrom writes that his commitment to Zionism allowed Scholem to reject a soteriology of nature, leading him rather to identify himself with and live "publicly in a religious community, a corporate religion with a political profile" (166, cf. 98n.107). If that is so, in what sense then is there a difference between the invention of tradition presupposed by Zionism and the invention presupposed by Eliade's Dacian fantasies? Could it not be said that if the Men of the Archangel had taken power in Rumania, Eliade could have identified himself with and lived

[5] These alchemical processes play a central role in Jung's work. On the symbolism of *nigredo* and *albedo*, see Jung, I: 82, 214–215, passim.

[6] In his critique of *Sabbatai Sevi The Mystical Messiah, 1626–1676* (Princeton University Press, 1973), Michael Lowy points out the limitations of Scholem's method

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publicly in a religious community and could have asked the same question asked by Scholem, namely, of "*whether, when, and in what form religion will be an effective force in society*" (Wasserstrom: 166). Should one not assume, along with Ginzburg (183n.70), that Eliade's turn to cosmic religion is the result of the defeat of the Iron Guard? Had Eliade managed to establish himself as the ideologist of the Iron Guard in power, he could have used his knowledge of the history of religions as Giuseppe Tucci did in Italy to transfigure the aims of the fascist state or as Jakob Wilhelm Hauer attempted to do in Germany during the first years of the National Socialist dictatorship (Benavides 1995, 2001a).

Another issue that deserves examination is Wasserstrom's treatment of Corbin's work on ancient Iranian religions and the related one concerning the anti-Semitism that Corbin and Jung allegedly shared with the second-century gnostics. Writing about Corbin's understanding of Ahriman, Wasserstrom claims that "Gnostic anti-Judaism is implicit in the identification of Ahriman with Jehovah" (177). He goes on to say that Jung's *Response to Job* is "a book rightly attacked by Martin Buber for its gnostic anti-Judaism," *Response to Job* being "Jung's single most important text for mounting a post-Holocaust assault on the God of the Jewish people" (178); and he also quotes Scholem to the effect that Gnosticism is "the greatest case of metaphysical antisemitism" (179, 190, 326n.45). Besides being confused by the anachronistic identification of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, readers unacquainted with research on Gnosticism may be led to share Wasserstrom's righteous indignation without being aware that, according to scholars who are neither anti-Jewish nor anti-Semitic, Gnosticism emerged in Jewish circles. Indeed, in his contribution to *Le origine dello gnosticismo*, Hans Jonas himself, despite his careless reference to "a kind of metaphysical antisemitism" supposedly present in Gnostic sources, acknowledged that despite its lack of "psychological verisimilitude," the Jewish origins of Gnosticism cannot be ruled out a priori, suggesting that "safer is the statement that Gnosticism originated in *close vicinity* and in partial reaction to Judaism" (107).[7] The question of whether a Jewish origin of Gnosticism had to do with the destruction of the second temple, with Jewish-Aramaic Wisdom traditions and related skeptical trends, or with other developments will continue to be debated.[8] In

[7] In the discussion with Daniélou, Grant, and Pétrement that follows his presentation, Jonas (105, 108) is even more nuanced.

[8] See, among others, Broek: 56–61, Daniélou: 455–456, 458, as well as his intervention after Grant's presentation; Pearson. 15–19, 34–35; and Rudolph 1967. 784–797, 1994: 58, 162ff., 296–297 For a discussion of theories concerning the relationship between Gnosis and Judaism, see Filoramo 225–228. Drijvers's skepticism concerning the issue of origins (831–835) goes beyond the issue of Jewish origins; the same is true of Kippenberg (369–370)

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any case, in rejecting the perverse creator of an evil world, these gnostic Jews necessarily would have had to reject Yahweh, that is, the being that they had hitherto considered as their god.[9] Similarly, the myths of the rejected tradition would have had to be read against the grain, as it happens, for instance, in the Second Treatise of the Great Seth (Nag Hammadi VII, 2).

It is because of this passionate rejection of the very possibility of any critique of the god of the Hebrew scriptures that Wasserstrom, whether consciously or not, becomes a theologian, an advocate of Yahweh—a deity that on page 234 briefly becomes "God" *tout court*—and, more generally, of monotheism, his assumption being all along that monotheism is a good thing and that its rejection is fascist or racist. Leaving aside the issue of monotheism versus polytheism, one can argue, against Buber, Scholem, and Wasserstrom, that by placing the god of Israelite mythology "in the prosecutorial docket," Jung was taking that god seriously, even if he—a German speaker, after all—had the indelicacy of making his case in German! More generally, one must ask whether, in attacking the amoral antimonotheistic esotericism of the Eranos mystagogues, Wasserstrom does not become an advocate of monotheism or even of a particular episode in the history of monotheism. Is not this advocacy, insofar as it is not explicit, the mirror image of the esoteric advocacy of those he criticizes?

The final questions have to do with two related issues: the status of Eliade's, Scholem's, and Corbin's theories as "religion after religion" and the relationship between religion and scholarship on religion. That Eliade's, Scholem's, and Corbin's theories were presented as a religion for spiritual elites has been demonstrated by Wasserstrom; that the theorists presented themselves as psychopomps is equally clear; that at least one of them, Eliade, was deeply implicated with fascism seems beyond doubt. On the other hand, it is unclear to what extent these were instances of "religion after religion." Is it not true that some religious reformers and theologians, from the Buddha to Barth, have tended to present their message as a rejection of "religion"? What seems to be the case is that, for Wasserstrom, these "religions after religion" are *Afterreligionen*, in the sense in which, for Erwin Rohde, Wilamowitz's review of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* was nothing more than *Afterphilologie*. Wasserstrom, it must be stressed, does not use this coarse term, for his indictment is as severe

[9] In his comments on R. M. Grant's presentation, Daniélou put it well: "Je pense que dans le judaïsme l'anticosmisme est l'expression d'une revolte juive contre le judaïsme lui-même, c'est-à-dire d'une révolution avant tout interieure au judaïsme, car je ne vois pourquoi des grecs ou des iraniens se seraient intéressés à Jahweh au point de se révolter contre lui. C'est uniquement des juifs qui ont pu se révolter contre Jahweh et contre les anges de Jahweh" (Le origini dello quosticismo 157). On the tradition of the "blasphemy of the demiurgue," see Pearson 23–24; for details, see Kippenberg 377–379.

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as it is courteous; nevertheless, it is difficult to avoid thinking that, for him, there is something demonic in these attempts—that, for Wasserstrom, these *Afterreligionen* are the simian counterparts of the real thing. However, even if, for moral reasons, one sympathizes with this position, the fact remains that some religions can be understood as claiming to have come after religion. In more general terms, insofar as in a zero-sum-game situation religions articulate the interests of a group, they are likely to be regarded as *Afterreligionen* by the adherents of those whose gods prove to be less powerful. Conversely, adherents of religions whose gods are triumphant tend to regard the suppressed religions as heresy, magic, witchcraft, or superstition (Benavides 1997, 2000a). Therefore, what is the most admirable aspect of *Religion after Religion* from a moral perspective is the least convincing from a scholarly one—for religions, whether they are articulated in the speculations of brilliant mystagogues or in the day-to-day activities of ordinary practitioners, are not primarily about being nice.

Regarding the connections between religion and scholarship on religion, it must be said that the rhetorical power of the doctrinal, ritual, and symbolic forms that constitute religion is such that those who study these forms tend to succumb to their charms, in such a way that—particularly in North America—they end up believing that in order to pursue their study they must become religion's celebrators. It is necessary, therefore, to study the study of religion not as if it were religion "after" religion but as if it were a religion, paying attention to the rhetorical, cognitive, and ideological techniques used in the defense of theological and cryptotheological positions.[10] This applies as much to the Eranos theorists studied in *Religion after Religion* as it does to many others whose political agendas may appear less objectionable.

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[10] See McCutcheon and Fitzgerald, two works devoted to a critique of the theological presuppositions of the study of religion in English-language scholarship. Their limitations are discussed in Benavides 2000b, 2001b.

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